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Ein Mensch Must Ein Sein

by

Serafina Sharlotta Strasser

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For my children and grandchild



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Introduction

I remember the first time I decided to write a book. It was in Boryslaw, my hometown, shortly after the Germans arrived in 1941. I was walking with my mother, a fine lady disguised as a peasant. She was carrying a lot of valuables—jewelry, silver, and china—to exchange for food at the house of Engineer Ringel and Pana Ziutka, a young woman who was helping to feed Jews. I was 11 years old and did not look Jewish. A German soldier on horseback came toward us, and instinctively I moved away from my mother. The soldier stopped and, speaking in German, asked if we had seen a Jew running away. My mother pretended not to understand, and he let us go. After he rode off, my mother, pale and shaking, turned to me and said that she was happy at my reaction. She realized, she said, that I was selfish enough and strong enough to survive.

We exchanged the valuables for bits of meat and other food, and I carried all of it home on my back, holding my mother's hand very tight, trying to show her that I was not really selfish. My mother was anything but selfish. Later on, when food was scarce, she would lie about having eaten so there would be more for my father, my sister, and me.

I remember thinking, as my mother and I walked home from Engineer Ringel's house, that some day I would write about this incident and how hurt I felt.

Two years later, in the summer of 1943, I hid from the Nazis deep in the woods outside Boryslaw. My mother, sister, aunts, uncles, and cousins all had been deported, and my father lived the labor camp in town. One day he sneaked away and found me in the woods. In a whisper, he begged me to do anything to survive, to save myself and live to tell what happened to our family and friends. "It just isn't fair for us to die and be forgotten," he said. "You must try to live through it and tell our story." I promised that I would.

Not long ago, my six-year-old grandson, who is half Jewish, asked me if it is true that I became an orphan because I was Jewish. When I told him yes, he asked, “Grandma, doesn’t God like Jewish people?” That was the moment I knew it was time to write these memoirs—my story and the stories of the wonderful people who are not here to tell theirs themselves.

This book is a fulfillment of my promise to my father. I always knew that telling our stories would take a lot of time and a lot of tears, but I did not know how much until I began. I am very grateful to my children, Mark, Jeff, and Rick, to my daughters-in-law, Ava and Lynn, and to my husband, Norman, for the encouragement and strength they gave me to relive that difficult part of my life. Without their support, and Jeff’s help on the manuscript, I could not have done it.

Thank you with all my heart.

Boryslaw
(Beginnings through June 1941)

We lived in a small town in Poland called Boryslaw. Even though it was small, Boryslaw was well-known for its oil production. Today Boryslaw is located in western Ukraine. At other times in its history, the town has been ruled by Austria, Russia, Germany, and Poland. During my childhood it belonged to Poland, and I only wanted to be a typical Polish girl.

For a few years my parents had lived in Austria, near Vienna, where my father learned to drill for oil. Upon returning home he became successful in the local oil industry. Even though we were Jews, my parents stressed that Poland was our country and that it was important to speak Polish well. My mother's family was large and colorful; I had three uncles, four aunts, and six cousins. On my father's side, I had one uncle, one aunt, and seven cousins. We were affluent compared to most other families in town. Although we were not religiously observant, I have very fond memories of the Jewish holidays, always celebrated at my grandparents' house, always together.

When my mother's youngest sister, Ciocia (Aunt) Mina, got married, the family decided to hold the wedding in our house. The front room was emptied, chairs were placed against the wall, and a *chuppa* (wedding canopy) was set up in the center of the floor. That was the first and only wedding I ever remember in our town. The Klezmar band played loud, strange music, which I found very moving. I remember our Polish and Ukrainian neighbors standing nearby, laughing at the whole scene. This upset my mother and her family, so I went outside and chased the people away. For the first time in my life, I realized that I was different from my neighbors.



Left to right: me, my mother (Muska) Klara, father (Tusko) Max, and sister Pola.

Boryslaw was a very pretty town, surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains and lush green forests. The Tysmienica River ran through town, carrying globs of oil that gave off an acrid smell. The winters were very cold in Boryslaw, with heavy snows that covered the smaller houses for days at a time. One Passover, I remember, a heavy snowfall left us stranded at my grandparents' house for several days.

We had a lovely house and a big garden with a gazebo covered in vines. My father loved to plant flowers, grow fruits and vegetables, and listen to the singing of his four canaries. My mother was very influenced by her life in Vienna. Besides running the house and raising my sister and me, she tried to bring culture and class into our lives, as well as the rest of the family's.

My mother was a beautiful woman and always dressed elegantly. She believed that being religious meant giving charity and kindness to less fortunate people. Every Friday night before

we sat down to eat, my mother would serve a meal to the many poor people who gathered on our front lawn.

My mother's name was Klara Jager Strasser. My grandparents called her by her Jewish name, Chaia. My father occasionally called her that, too, but I know she preferred to be called Klara. My sister and I called my mother Muska (Mom) and my father Tusko (Dad). His name was Max Strasser. His Jewish name was Meier, and my mother had her own endearment for him—Majorku. My parents always seemed to be in love, teasing each other affectionately. I remember him as a handsome man, looking very tan in his white summer suit with knickers. I was very proud of the way both my parents looked and acted.

Every summer my mother, my sister Pola, and I went away for a two-week vacation. In the summer of 1939 we went to a place called Ivonich, a mountain resort known for its sulfur baths, beautiful parks, and outdoor concerts. It was in Ivonich that I first overheard grown-up conversations about troubles in Germany and the possibility of war. A lady who had fled Berlin befriended my mother and told her about the mistreatment of Jews there. My mother told me not to worry because the German people were too cultured and too smart to take a maniac like Hitler seriously.

When we returned home, my father was waiting for us at the train station. With him were my best friend, Lusia, and her brother, Wilus. Lusia was very cute, with dark braided hair and light blue eyes. Wilus was very smart, two years older than Lusia and me. It was understood that Wilus and I would marry some day. Lusia and Wilus were anxious to show me their new house, which had just been built across from our garden. It was one of the most modern houses in town.



Above: at the gazebo in my backyard—me (far left), my little cousin Cesia (white dress), sister Pola (rear right), friend Lusia Greifinger (far right), and other cousins. Left: with my mother and sister on vacation in Ivonich. Below: Lusia and her brother Wilus.



September 1, 1939. We woke to the blare of sirens, announcing war. Everyone was ushered into underground shelters that the families in town had built that summer. The children were assured that the fighting would not last long, as English and French forces could be counted on to join with Poland and win the war.

Within one week, Nazi troops marched into Poland and took over the entire country. They stayed in Boryslaw for only a short time, but I remember an awful feeling of fear while they were there. Luckily for us, Germany and the Soviet Union had made an agreement to divide up Poland, and by late September our town came under Russian control.

Now Soviet troops entered Boryslaw in tanks and open trucks. The streets of the town were lined with people. The Jews were ecstatic, as we knew the Russians would not persecute or kill us. But the Ukrainians were angry, still blaming the Soviet Union for taking away their independence. The Poles were resentful, too, having never forgiven Russia for partitioning their land in the 18th century. Since the Jews were the only ones happy about the arrival of the Russians, we began to feel a lot of animosity from our friends and neighbors.

Our lives did change drastically during the Soviet occupation. Private businesses were seized from their owners and turned over to the state. My father worked on his own oil wells, but the authorities left him alone because his expertise was so vital. Russian families began arriving in town, and they needed places to live. So, to avoid having strangers assigned to us, we took in both sets of my grandparents and a refugee couple from Germany. My sister and I loved the excitement.

My father's father, Solomon, looked like Santa Claus with his long white beard and mustache. He sang Jewish songs all day. His wife, Zelda, was always at odds with my mother over our upbringing. A few times she woke me at night to read her romance stories in Polish.

Where she got them, I don't know, but those sexy late-night stories were our little secret. My other grandmother, Reha, was completely different—a formidable woman. She traded in stocks and bonds, and helped all her children financially. Grandpa Munish was a very mild, handsome man who studied Torah and did little work.

For us children the years of Soviet occupation were a happy time. The Russians placed great importance on education and told us that the future of the world depended on us. The school system was converted to the Russian language and curriculum, and a Communist youth organization, called Komsomol, was formed. Only very good students were admitted. My parents were very much opposed, but finally I convinced them to let me join. How proud I was to wear the red scarf with hammer and sickle! Once I delivered a speech in a school auditorium that was packed with parents. In my speech I declared how lucky we were to live in a

My Grandfather Munish (left) served in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I.



My beautiful Ciocia (Aunt) Mina, who was married in our house.



Communist society. My poor parents were petrified and scolded me. I was 11 years old and did not understand politics.

I loved Russian folk music. I thought it was very beautiful. Everyone, young and old, was encouraged to play an instrument, to dance and sing. I still have great nostalgia for the times my family sat around the tiled stove, trying to keep warm, singing new songs and telling each other about the events of the day.

A good singing voice was a big asset, but mine was the worst in the family. Only Ciocia Chava enjoyed listening to me. She was my mother's sister and my favorite aunt. Ciocia Chava was expecting a baby. My cousin Cesia was already eight years old, and Ciocia Chava wanted another child desperately. Her husband, Wujek (Uncle) Kuba, was a ladies' man. As I realized even then, Ciocia wanted a baby to keep him close to home. My aunt and uncle told me to practice my singing so I could lullaby their baby to sleep.

In school we were studying ballet and rehearsing a performance of *Coppelia*. The teacher had narrowed her choices for the lead role to three girls, and I was one of them. The day she announced the three candidates I was so excited that I ran home and announced that I had won the part. My family was thrilled for me. Ciocia Chava offered her beautiful dining room curtain to make into a tutu, and she immediately began sewing.

After a few serious tryouts, one of the other girls was selected for the role. On the way home from school I began to feel sick. For the next 24 hours, I was delirious with a high fever. Muska sat at my bedside, terribly worried. Even after the doctor's visit they could not figure out what was wrong with me. At school the next day, my sister Pola told the teacher that I was ill and wouldn't be able to dance. The teacher told her that it was too bad I wasn't feeling well



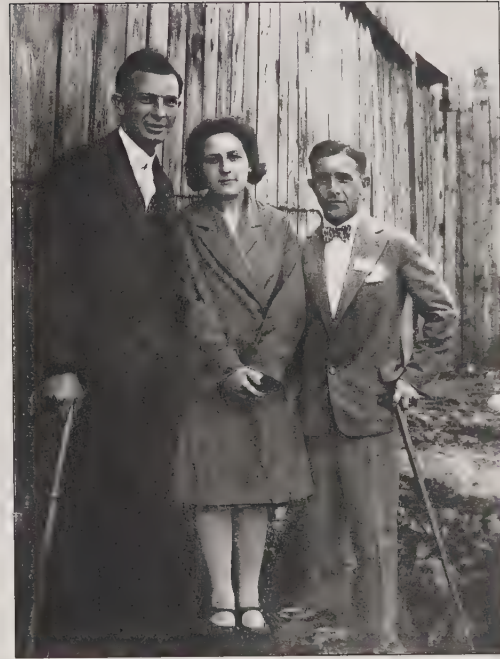
Above left: Ciocia Mina (far left), my sister Pola, cousin Cesia, and Ciocia Chava. Above right: Cesia and Ciocia Chava. Right: Me and Pola in matching outfits, with our little cousin.

but that I wouldn't be dancing anyway. Pola did not tell our mother because she didn't want to see me punished for lying, but she did tell Ciocia Chava.

While putting *bankie* (small, heated glass cups) on my back to reduce the fever, Ciocia told me that I must use the power that had made me sick to get me well. She told me that dancing ballet or having a good singing voice wasn't the key to happiness. She said that I was very smart and pretty, and that the power to make myself sick or healthy also made me special.

We finished making the tutu together and gave it to my Ukrainian girlfriend, Stefa Golen, who had won the part. Stefa danced beautifully. Watching her I knew that I did not have the talent to be a ballerina.

At around the same time I remember my family becoming very upset when Uncle Leon, one of my mother's brothers, announced that he was returning to Germany. Uncle Leon had come to us from Krakow, a big city in Poland, where he had lived with his wife, Mania, and daughter, Stella. Whenever anyone mentioned Leon and Mania, there was an aura of romance and happiness. Mania had fallen in love with Leon while she was engaged to another man. She broke the engagement to marry Uncle Leon, which of course caused quite a scandal! After the wedding they moved to Krakow, where Uncle Leon opened a very successful toy factory. In September 1939, when Poland was divided, Krakow fell under German occupation. Leon, Mania, and Stella fled for Boryslaw to be with us in Russian territory. Somehow, during the journey, they got separated. Uncle Leon reached our house and stayed until he saw a notice announcing open travel between the Russian and German zones. Everyone tried to dissuade him, but Uncle Leon insisted on going back to find his wife and daughter. We all went to the train station with gifts for Mania and Stella. I overheard a guard say that we should give him



***Above left:** My Uncle Leon as a young boy.
Above right: Uncle Leon (far left), Aunt Mania, and Uncle Kuba. Mania had broken off her engagement to Kuba to marry Leon; Kuba later married my Aunt Chava! **Right:** Aunt Mania and Cousin Stella.*



warm clothes for the place he was going. Months later, we found out that the train had taken Uncle Leon to Siberia.

Our formerly spacious house now was cramped with people. Food was scarce, and we lived in constant fear of deportation to Russia. Two years later, we wished we had been deported there. For whatever hardships we endured under Russian rule, I remember those days as a time of happiness and warm family togetherness.

June 22, 1941. Again we woke to sirens. German planes circled above, and the roar of anti-aircraft guns filled the air. The war between Germany and the Soviet Union had begun.

The entire population of Boryslaw was concerned over the changing political situation. As German troops won more territory and moved closer, the Jews became more and more anxious. By that time we had heard about special Nazi troops whose job it was to terrorize Jews. The Ukrainians, meanwhile, were overjoyed with the approach of the Germans. The Poles did not know which of the two evils would be worse.

My father wanted us to leave with the Russians, who agreed to take us along. But my mother would not hear of it. She looked at her lovely house and possessions and refused to abandon them—not to mention the rest of her family.

As the Russians left, they set fire to all the large oil wells in the area. Each well burst into flames like a giant torch. The explosion of power lines and oil reservoirs created giant columns of smoke and fire. The sound of wood burning and glass breaking filled the air. People ran in all directions trying to avoid the heat and smell. Jews worried about their fate.

Nobody slept that night. It was very hot, yet strangely beautiful. We held each other tight and prayed that the horror stories we had heard were not true. Pola asked mother if she thought hell was like this. “No, my child,” Muska answered. “Our hell is about to begin.”

German Occupation *(July 1941 - August 1942)*

German troops entered Boryslaw on July 1, 1941, and we had a new ruler. Although the Ukrainians were similar to the Russians in many ways, they never wanted to be part of the Soviet Union. They always wanted an independent Ukraine. So they had sabotaged Soviet installations at every opportunity and collaborated with the Germans, who promised them independence. The Russians had responded by arresting or killing many Ukrainian youths. Somehow, blame for the killings had fallen on the Jews.

Two days after the Germans marched into town, we knew something terrible was going to happen. The streets began filling with people from surrounding villages, wild and angry looking, carrying hammers, axes, and sticks. There was going to be a pogrom.

Fortunately, my family did not live in the Jewish section, and we had time to hide. Muska and Tusko left me and Pola with neighbors, who promised to keep us safe, and ran into the woods.

For two days Pola and I lay hidden in a cellar where cabbage and potatoes were stored. Even under ground we could hear the screaming and shouting.

Pola was a very delicate girl, with a kind of nervous disorder. Her hands shook whenever she was upset. For the entire two days we spent in the cellar, Pola shook uncontrollably in my arms. We both cried a lot and comforted each other. Pola was five years older than I and very pretty. I had always been jealous of the attention she got, but in those dark two days I realized how much I really loved her. I swore that I would always be there for her.

In the aftermath of the pogrom, German soldiers took the bodies of murdered Ukrainian boys and made the Jews clean them up. The Jews, in turn, were ridiculed and beaten ruthlessly,

sometimes to death. More than two hundred Jews perished this way. Everyone in our family was still alive, and we moved back into the house. We all felt grateful.

But life became difficult. We were forced to wear white armbands with the Star of David. Fear became our second nature. Food rations were very small. We were able to trade clothing, china, silver, and jewelry with the peasants for eggs, cheese, and potatoes. Our garden was a godsend, and we shared the vegetables and fruit with anybody we knew to be hungry.

Late one night that November, a Christian neighbor knocked on our door and told us to hide. He had heard there was going to be another pogrom. We begged my father to go with us, but he was afraid that there would be terrible punishment if he did not report for work. Fortunately he listened. All the men who reported to work the next morning were taken into the woods and shot.

Ciocia Mina and Wujek Abba, who had been married in our house, now had a little son named Jozio. They lived in a nearby village. The night of the pogrom, the Ukrainian people in that village slaughtered all the Jewish families. Wujek Abba managed to escape by running through the woods, arriving at our house totally devastated. My mother never understood or forgave him for abandoning his family. Ciocia Mina and little Jozio were hacked to death.

A hopeless, morbid mood came over us. The dehumanization and persecution of the Jews continued, with no signs of letting up. We tried hard to keep some kind of normalcy, but our spirits were fading.

In August 1942 rumors began circulating that old people and children were going to be deported. Only able-bodied workers would be allowed to remain in Boryslaw. A friend of my father, a Polish-German engineer named Ringel, occupied a high position in the oil company and offered to hide me at his house.

It was a hot summer day and the air was still, as if a storm was coming. My parents told me that I was in danger and that it was time for me to go into hiding. They assured me that we would be reunited after a few days. I remember what I was wearing that day—a navy blue pleated skirt and a short-sleeved sweater that I had knitted myself. Ciocia Chava made fun of my protruding breasts and told me that she would be the one to sew my first bra.

I was glad that she was able to smile. Her son Ludwig had been born the very day German troops had entered Boryslaw the previous summer. He was a beautiful little boy with big eyes and dark brown, curly hair. I shook his cradle and sang to him all the time. Ciocia Chava did not have enough milk to feed the baby, and I often brought her vegetables and fruit from our garden. I will never forget the day I came with food for Ciocia Chava and found her going crazy. German soldiers, accompanied by Ukrainian police, had been ransacking Jewish homes in search of radios, furs, and other valuables. When they could not find any in Ciocia Chava's house, they went into a rage and threw little Ludwig against the wall, killing him.

Now, on this hot summer day in August 1942, Engineer Ringel came to pick me up in a horse and carriage with a driver. I felt very grown up and important. Muska and Tusko kissed me goodbye and walked away hand-in-hand, crying. In the window I saw Pola, crying too. That was the last time I ever saw my mother, my sister, my grandparents, my aunts, and my cousins.

Engineer Ringel's house was located on the outskirts of town. Pana Ziutka was his houseguest or mistress, I never really knew which. She was very short and not very pretty. She had a good heart, but she also wanted to profit from the situation. Six people offered her money for a place to hide, so she sneaked all of them into the house. Mr. Ringel was a very handsome, well-dressed gentleman. He was willing to save me for my father's sake, but he was

a Nazi sympathizer. He became very angry when he learned that six Jews were hidden in his house.

We hid in the attic and came down only at night to get food or to use the bathroom. I was the only child and could not understand why adults with working papers had to hide. This pogrom lasted three miserable, rainy days. I felt as if the heavens were weeping with us. The rain fell in big, heavy drops. The deep, rolling thunder and bright bolts of lightning gave me hope that God was finally getting angry. The shooting and the cries of human anguish were so loud and clear that I thought the echoes would carry all the way up to God and that help would come. But no one heard or cared.

Mr. Ringel went to work every day and reported to us what was happening. This time it was a well-organized deportation. The Germans appointed a Jewish police force to go from house to house and take anyone who did not have a work card to the railroad station. Everyone in my family was taken away except my father and uncles, who were left behind to work. Six thousand people were deported in three days. On the last night, all the Jews who had done the rounding up were shot.

Just before my mother was shoved into the train, she recognized one of the Ukrainian guards on the platform. He was the husband of our maid. In the crush of people, my mother made her way to where the guard was standing. She offered him all of her jewelry if only he would deliver a message to me. Finally he agreed, so she quickly tore the picture from her *ausweis* (identification card) and wrote this message on the back:

“Do not forget us and do not let the world forget. Make sure they know that we were good people. I love you, Muska.”

In the picture, my mother's hair was pulled back in a chignon, and she looked very sad. She wore a light blue and navy striped knitted dress that opened in the front with a zipper from America. That was how I heard of America for the very first time. No one else in Boryslaw owned a dress with a zipper.

That picture of my mother is deeply embedded in my soul. I used to take it out every night, and I cried so much over it that it became yellow and stained. One of the Polish women who hid me for a while told me that I must get rid of the picture if I wanted to live. She also said that if my mother loved me, she would have taken me with her. I felt so hurt and confused.

After several more days, we were told that it was safe to return home. As I approached our house, I noticed an old man crying hysterically and hitting his head against our front gate. He was dirty and disheveled, with a shoe on one foot and a sock with a big hole on the other. As I got close to the man, he threw his arms around me, kissing and hugging me, drenching my face with his tears. I was stunned at the change in my father.

"I don't want to live anymore," he cried, "but I promised Muska that I would take care of you. You are the only one God left me with. You must survive."

My Tusko and I were in mourning from that moment on, but our will to live became very strong. We stood in long lines for food and endured many hardships together. We had each other to comfort.

A young Ukrainian man named Muzak, who worked with my father, was getting married and looking for a place to live. My father suggested that he use our house, because he knew we would have to leave it shortly. In exchange, the man promised to help me survive.

The Dream *(September - October 1942)*

During the two months my father and I lived alone in the house, he went to work early every morning with a group of Jewish men, escorted by Ukrainian police. I was left alone, anxiously awaiting his return all day. Very often, men were picked at random and shot by some capricious German guard. I prayed constantly that it wouldn't be my Tusko.

It was my job to prepare our food, using whatever was growing in the garden. Cabbage, potatoes, even dandelions seemed delicious in those days. My father was so proud and grateful, as were a few of his friends who managed to sneak to our house for a meal.

We were not allowed on the street after 6:00 P.M., nor to have any lights on. The Jews always tried to comfort each other, wondering how long the oppression would continue. The misery began to show in the faces of the people—haunted, starving, totally dehumanized. Every Jewish family had suffered losses, but we did not realize that the worst was yet to come. We did not allow ourselves to believe that our loved ones would never come back.

I was asleep on the sofa and woke up screaming and crying. In my dream, I saw a field of wheat growing very high and bright yellow. On top of each stalk, I saw a familiar face: my mother, my sister Pola, grandma Reha and all her daughters—Ciocia Rivka, Ciocia Chava, and Ciocia Mina. They were shaking their heads and moaning.

My father and his friends tried desperately to calm me down, but I was inconsolable. In my heart, I knew that something terrible had happened. The expressions on their faces and the moaning told me so.

In July 1945, when the war was over, I boarded a train and left Boryslaw to look for my father. The train stopped in a Polish village called Belzec. Someone pointed out where the

extermination camp had been. That was where all the Jews from our region, including my family, had been gassed.

In the place where the camp had been now stood a huge field of wheat, growing very high and bright yellow.

The Ghetto *(October 1942)*

In October 1942 came a new disaster. The Germans decided to form a Jewish ghetto, a confined area where we would all have to live and where they could keep us surrounded at all times. Most of the Jews in town had been deported in August, but the working men—and any other family members who had managed to stay hidden—were moved into the ghetto. My father, my uncles Michael, Bronek, and Kuba, my little cousin Cesia, and I were all cramped into a small room.

The ghetto was surrounded by a large gate and a river that separated it from the rest of the town. Every morning the men had to report for work and were escorted out of the ghetto by the Ukrainian police. The women and children were left behind. We had very little food. The rations were small, and we were hungry most of the time. Sometimes the men were able to sneak some products from the outside.

I became the lady of the house—the cook, the laundress, and the mother to Cesia. She was nine years old now and very small for her age. Although I was only three years older, I became her idol and guardian. One day as I was doing laundry, I heard people screaming and running outside. The old lady next door told me to grab my little cousin and run. My hands were full of suds, and I hesitated. “Go fast!” the woman shrieked. Cesia and I ran.

We found a small opening in the gate, ran through it, and crossed a shallow part of the river into open fields. The police chased all the people who were trying to get away, shooting at us from behind. We ran and ran, crying with fear. I saw blood coming down my legs and got hysterical. To this day I remember thinking, “How could I be running and dying at the same time?”

Finally we were far from the ghetto with no one chasing us. We went to Cesia's house, now occupied by a Ukrainian woman, formerly her family's maid. She would not let us stay, but I begged her to help me with my wound. The woman laughed and explained what had happened to me. She handed me some rags and told me to stay away from boys.

It was late afternoon. Cesia and I decided to split up and try to find the places where our fathers worked. As I was walking along a road, a young Polish boy came up to me and began to flirt. His name was Stephan. I thought he was nice and told him that it would be okay if he walked me to my aunt's house. It wasn't really my aunt. My father, who worked nearby, had given me the name of a Ukrainian woman who had promised to help us if needed. She lived on the way to Urych, a small village just outside of Boryslaw.

As we walked toward Urych, a German policeman stopped to ask if we had seen any Jews running away from the ghetto. We shook our heads. Obviously Stephan did not know I was Jewish. He said that if he saw any, he would kill them himself. As we neared my destination, I told Stephan that my uncle did not allow me to go out with boys, but I did promise to meet him the next day.

The Ukrainian lady was very kind. She let me stay in her house for several days, hidden in the cellar, until my father could find me a hiding place. Her husband was in the Ukrainian police, and we prayed he wouldn't discover me. He often came home drunk and beat her. I swore to myself that I would have him punished for that ... some day.

The New Me (1943)

Among my father's many friends was a kind-hearted priest who helped Jews by finding them Polish or Ukrainian birth certificates. My father had gone to see him and came back with one for me. It had been issued in the name of "Janina Koslovska," born on the same day as I, May 8, 1930. The real Janina Koslovska had died at the age of five, but I would live on.

I called myself Janka and fell in love with my new image. Every night I would put a clothespin on my nose, believing it would shorten it a bit. Long noses were associated with being Jewish. So was wearing shoes. I started walking barefoot and was so proud of my hard soles, scratched feet, and peasant-girl walk.

Uncle Michael, one of my mother's three brothers, met a Polish couple named Sobkowicz. Mr. Sobkowicz was a woodsman, and they lived in a shabby little house in the forest. It was near the oil wells where the Jewish men were brought to work. My Uncle Michael pleaded with the Sobkowiczes to take me into their home. Deportations from the ghetto were taking place all the time, and I needed a safe place to stay. Later, when I got to know Mrs. Sobkowicz, she told me that my uncle's charm persuaded her to take me in.

She was a pleasant-looking woman with a sweet, innocent face but an old, overworked look. No wonder. Every morning she woke early to feed the chickens, milk the goats, chop wood, and prepare breakfast for her family. Mr. Sobkowicz also worked very hard, but he took better care of himself. He was a strong-looking man with a big black mustache. He was very flirtatious, and I heard him making passes at all the girls and women who came around. My father told me to be quiet and not tell anyone about it.

Their children, Polda and Risiek, were greatly influenced by their mother. Mrs. Sobkowicz was a deeply religious woman who believed all kinds of superstitions. She could not read or write, but she convinced her family that it was wrong to treat Jewish people so cruelly. This was not true of many Ukrainians, who typically hated Jews and were happy to carry out the beatings, murders, and pogroms on behalf of the Nazis.

Mrs. Sobkowicz introduced me to *Matka Boska* (the Virgin Mary) and assured me that if I prayed to her every day, I would be saved. I became obsessed with my prayers and feverishly begged my new God to help me and to bring back my family. Years after the war, I continued to pray to Mary in times of stress.

Polda, the daughter, was my age and very pretty. I lived vicariously through her. When she came home from school, she told me all her adventures. When we sat down to do homework, I did most of it and she ran off to play. Risiek, her brother, was four years older and paid no attention to me. I tried hard for him to notice me as a girl, but to no avail. Once, when his mother reprimanded him, he said that I was just a Jew and that they shouldn't risk their lives to save me. I felt totally rejected as a human being. How these two children were able to keep my existence a secret is still a mystery to me.

For a while I was able to stay in a back room of the house. In the evenings I was able to join the family in the kitchen and living room area. It was a cozy and comfortable place to live. Mrs. Sobkowicz truly loved me and planned to keep me after the war if my mother did not return. I would be properly christened and become her daughter.

My father, who had a reputation for finding oil, was let out of the labor camp every day to work at different sites. When he worked on oil wells in the area near the Sobkowicz's house, he often managed to sneak away and visit me for a few minutes. Our conversations were very

meaningful to me. Above all, he wanted me to live and was willing to risk his own life for it. He tried to give the Sobkowicz family everything he could possibly acquire from his friends in the labor camp.

During the summer months, it was too dangerous for me to stay around the house. All the children were off from school, and often they played in the woods nearby. Many grownups would also walk through the forest, picking mushrooms and berries or just enjoying the cool of the shade.

So, every morning before light, I left the house and walked deep into the forest. As time went on, I became an expert at finding good places to hide. They had to have low bushes, lots of trees, and high grass, preferably near a brook or waterfall. The German dogs could not sniff human beings across water.

But I loved the surroundings. I loved the fresh morning smell of blossoms, the butterflies that flew by, the chirping of the birds, the busy ants frantically building their homes, and the families of bees buzzing around. Toward dusk, a fox or two would run quickly past me.

Once, lying in the grass, I woke with a snake wrapped around my leg. He was black with yellow spots and hissed viciously. There were voices nearby, so I had to get rid of him quietly. I picked up a big green leaf that had fallen from a nearby tree, wrapped my hand in it and, without a sound, uncurled the snake from my leg.

Most of the creatures in the woods were not a threat to me. People were. Sometimes they came into my area of the woods, but I made sure to have a basket in my hand and pretend to be picking mushrooms just like they were.

My father managed to find me one afternoon, and he had some books for me. We found a quiet spot to talk, hidden in some bushes. In a whisper, he told me that he hoped I would

survive and read all the books that would be written about those horrible times, and that I should try to tell our story, too.

Rainy days were especially long and dreary in the woods. To stay dry, I would crawl into the hollow of an old tree, where sometimes I would sit for hours. With the first snow, however, we realized that I could not stay in the forest. It wasn't the cold or the wet that was the problem. My footprints would be a sure giveaway. I needed a hiding place.

Christmas 1943

Boryslaw looked magical in winter, always covered in snow. At night, thousands of lightbulbs illuminated the tall oil rigs on top of a hill called Horodiszczce. The flickering of the lights made Horodiszczce look like one huge Christmas tree. The Gentile world was getting ready for the holiday, and everywhere was a feeling of peace and tranquility. The Jews hoped to be left alone and safe, at least for a few days.

I was staying in the storage shed of the Sobkowicz's house while my father looked for a new place for me to hide. I spent my time making paper chains and other Christmas ornaments. I loved painting pinecones and cutting out angels from heavy brown paper. At night when we were sure no one would come around, I went into the kitchen and helped Mrs. Sobkowicz cook. We prepared all kinds of Polish dishes, most of them made out of potatoes and cabbage. They smelled wonderful. For Christmas dinner we were going to have a pig roast and *makownick*, a cake made with poppy seeds.

As the family was getting ready to go to midnight mass, Polda suggested that I come along. After all, she said, nobody in the neighborhood knew me. I was very excited at the prospect of doing something normal and out in the open. I felt so un-Jewish by then that I began to think my appearance had changed, too.

I bundled up in a big woolen scarf, covering as much of my face as possible. It was a very cold night. I felt protected against the wind and, just in case, well disguised.

The night was beautiful, the bright stars reflecting on the snow-covered branches. The whole world glimmered like rhinestones. Snow crunching under our feet, we wished "Merry Christmas" to all the passersby, many of whom sang Christmas carols.

Inside the church, the organ was playing and voices sang out. Everyone was dressed in their very best clothes, and there was a real feeling of warmth and holiness. I was so enchanted and thrilled to be out of hiding that I failed to notice the scarf falling from my head. I was standing near the door among strangers, the Sobkowiczs having taken pews near the front.

Suddenly there was a shriek. It came from a young boy I knew from school. "There is a Jew among us!" he shouted.

The priest ordered silence and continued the service. Next to me stood a big farmer in a fur coat, fur hat, and heavy black boots. The very look of this man frightened me. Then he turned to me and said quietly, "If it's you, run! I'll give you cover. After all, it's Christmas." He moved in front of the doorway to block the view, and out I ran. As I hurried away, the snow was falling heavily, covering my footsteps. By the time I reached the house, I was covered in snow, too.

Kuciumunia
(February 1944)

My father met some people in the labor camp who had managed to salvage a few pieces of jewelry and gold coins. They made a plan. Deportations from the camp were very frequent, but somehow people knew when trouble was coming, and a few always managed to escape. So my father went to Mr. Sobkowicz and offered him money to build a hiding place, a bunker they could escape to and where I could stay hidden during winter. So the *kuciumunia* (hiding place) was built.

The *kuciumunia* was a small room dug into the side of a hill. There were tree branches and grass on top, covered with snow. A kind of vent was inserted in the ceiling, a 10-inch by 10-inch block that I was able to open for some air at night and a little sunshine during the day. Everyone warned me to be very careful because people were often outside picking mushrooms and hunting deer. God help me if I was discovered.

The way into my bunker was a sliding door in the back wall of a small, rundown barn with goats and chickens, not even a cow. The door was well disguised with hay and farming tools, and I felt safe inside. The walls and floor of the bunker were covered with wood boards; in one corner of the room stood a pot for waste.

I rarely left the bunker. Day after day I sat there, hidden and lonely. I read a lot of books, whatever I could get my hands on, and wrote a diary. I hated doing the diary because all my days were the same—dark, with no one to see or talk to. I loved being in the open and begged my father to take me to the labor camp. Officially there were about 500 men in the camp; unofficially, there were women and children, too. Of course he wouldn't take me there and told me how lucky I was to be where I was. Sometimes he would sneak out at night to visit me,

leaving before dawn to return to camp. Once he brought a cigar box filled with diamonds, rubies, pearls, rings, and American gold coins. I played with them for a while and then buried the box under a tree.

One morning I was sitting at the wooden shelf I used as a table, writing and looking into a little mirror. Above me I heard some noise and sensed some movement, but I paid no attention. I assumed it was woodcutters or farmers just passing through, as they often did. Then, all of a sudden, I heard a voice yelling in Ukrainian, “Here they are! The Jews! I found them!”

The day before someone had reported to Nemetz, the German chief of the Ukrainian police, that Jews were hiding in the area. With a squad of about ten policemen, Nemetz came looking. They had beaten Mr. Sobkowicz until he bled, but he swore there were no Jews on his property. The police were about to leave, but one of them ran up the side of the hill to urinate. That’s when he spotted the reflection of my mirror. He called to the others, who pulled down the wall of the bunker and found me. Fear was my second nature by then, but I was numb.

Nemetz was furious when they opened the bunker, expecting to find more people. Mr. Sobkowicz had seized the opportunity to run off, but Mrs. Sobkowicz—whom I will love dearly to my dying day—begged Nemetz not to hurt me.

“Who is she?” screamed Nemetz.

“She is my daughter,” pleaded Mrs. Sobkowicz.

“No she’s not,” he shouted. “She’s a Jew!”

He slapped her hard and began staring at me. What a shame, he said. With my beautiful blonde braids, I looked like a German girl and was *zu schon* (too pretty) to have to die. The policemen, who spoke Ukrainian, felt bad for me. One of them recognized me. He wished there were a way to reach my father, who, with his knowledge of German, could plead for my life.

Nemetz pointed his rifle at me and ordered me to walk ahead toward a tree. At that moment I remembered my father's instructions: if you ever get caught, look straight into the killer's eyes; no one can kill a child if you look him in the eye. That's what I did. I just turned around and stared in Nemetz's eyes. They were an ugly watery blue, and his face was red with anger, but it worked. It took only a moment for Nemetz to change his mind. He screamed for me to get into the wagon with the other policemen. He rode ahead on his motorcycle.

When we got to the police station, my father was already there. A friend of his worked as a translator in the police station, and news travels fast in a small town. My father spoke for himself, and his German was impressive. He begged Nemetz for my life. I cannot describe the torture and humiliation he endured in front of me.

Nemetz was touched. "*Du bist ferikt!* (You are crazy!),” he shrieked. “Is your daughter a child or a woman?”

“She is just a child,” cried my father.

“Then grab her and run before I change my mind,” shouted Nemetz. “Bring her back to me when she is a woman!”

My father smuggled me into the labor camp with him. The people there did not believe their eyes. I was the only child ever to have escaped the beastly police chief. From that day on, people in camp called my father "*der ferikter fater*.”

A Jewish Heart *(Spring 1944)*

My father was determined to save me. I begged to stay with him in the camp, but he wouldn't hear of it. Often the police would search the barracks while the men were at work, and anyone they found was taken away and never seen again.

But I didn't want to be left alone any more. I threatened my father that I would become a Christian and forget all about the Jews. It was the one and only time he ever slapped my face. Afterwards he asked my forgiveness and stressed how important it was that I survive and tell of the horrors that were taking place.

We agreed that I would have to find a new place to stay. I would go to the farms and houses of the people who had promised him to help me. But the whole town knew about the incident with Nemetz, and people were afraid to keep me for any length of time. I went knocking on windows and back doors at night. Sometimes I was received, sometimes not.

One night I knocked on the door of our own house. The young man to whom my father had given the keys, Muzak, lived there with his wife. I had only met Mrs. Muzak—Maruszka was her name—once before. As a young bride she had come to see the house my father had offered them. When she saw the way I looked now, she burst into tears and opened her arms to me. She insisted that I sleep right there in my parents' bed with them.

Maruszka was only 19 years old. She had big, beautiful sky-blue eyes and long, blonde braids entwined around her head. She sang lovely Ukrainian songs, and we became friends. My hair was also in braids, thick and long but full of lice. Maruszka sat me in the bathtub and spent hours pulling the lice and nests from my hair. Then she soaked my hair in petroleum and wrapped my head in a scarf overnight. The smell was so awful that I had to sleep in the cellar.

The next morning she washed my hair with a thick brown soap. She even cut her finger to feign an injury so she had an excuse to buy peroxide. In about two hours I had bright blonde hair—dry as straw, but clean!

It felt strange to be in my own house. Everything was the same as when we lived there, except our pictures were gone. In their place, the Muzaks had hung all kinds of religious pictures and icons. I knew that my mother would be grateful to Maruszka for the way she treated me, but I could not stay in the house much longer. The neighbors were always around, and I had to stay hidden all the time.

One day Maruszka confided in me how disappointed she was that she had not gotten pregnant. Her husband was getting angry. She told me that she would go home to the village where her parents lived. An old woman there would perform a ritual that would assure her of having a baby. While she was in the village, Maruszka would also ask her family to take me in.

Maruszka left me with her husband. He was very indebted to my father and spoke so fondly of him that I felt sure he would not let any harm befall me. I went to sleep in Pola's old room, but I was awakened by Mr. Muzak. He was fondling and caressing me, reciting Ukrainian poems about love and loneliness. When he tried to spread my legs, I screamed and he put a pillow over my face. I was raped by the man to whom my father given our house and taught a trade. I ran to get my bundle of clothes. He grabbed my hands and said, "If you tell anybody what happened, I will have both you and your father killed."

I ran out of the house and knocked on the window of my friend, Stefa Golen. She hid me in her barn for the rest of the night and the following day. As soon as it got dark again, I left and started hunting for another place to hide. I stayed away from my house and did not return until fifty years later.

During the next several months I alternated among four or five places of refuge. People were being punished severely for helping Jews, and very few were willing to take the risk.

One dark and dreary day I was walking from the town of Meraznice toward Engineer Ringel's house. It was about a three-hour walk on back roads and over the hills. Suddenly, two German policemen on horses appeared. I reacted badly and ran behind a big tree. They yelled out and galloped directly toward me. Speaking in German, they asked why I had tried to hide. Of course I pretended not to understand them. Then one policeman asked in a very broken Polish, "*Gdzie Dom?*" ("Where is your house?") I realized that they did not think I was a Jewess but were angry that I had run. I answered in Polish, "*Ja idę do Domu*" ("I am going home"), and pointed to a little wooden shack on top of a hill. The Polish-speaking policeman hit me on the head with his whip, and off they went. I wasn't sure if they would follow me, so I went toward the house I had shown them.

I held my head in my hands. The pain was enormous. My skin was red and burning. At the house an old woman was sitting on a stool, peeling turnips. I blurted out that I was a Jewish girl, hungry and hurt, and would she help me. At first she just stared at me and kept crossing herself. Then I spoke to her in Ukrainian, and she understood. She had a tough, weather-beaten face and skin like parchment.

She took the scarf off her head and handed it to me. Then she said, "Take the knife and start peeling the turnips so you can eat some." Her name was Kasia, and she lived in one room with a straw mattress on the floor and animals all around. Inside that one-room house were two goats, several chickens and cats, and a big, black, lazy dog.

We hardly spoke, but I knew Kasia cared for me and was glad to have the company. She told her neighbors that I was a relative's orphan who had come to help with the daily chores. I took the goats out every day, and another woman entrusted me to take care of her cow. Other children were doing the same, and I enjoyed a few bearable weeks.

Sometimes I would see Jewish men on their way to or from the labor camp, and I was able to get word to my father. Once he passed by himself. Though we could not signal each other, I could see his face beaming with relief at the knowledge that I was safe.

One afternoon the other children and I went into the woods looking for deer, hoping to bring one home for dinner. Instead we found a Jew. He came out of hiding from behind some trees. He seemed very old and feeble, but I'm sure he was not—the cold, fear, and hunger just made him seem that way. My companions all had sticks in their hands, and the fun of the day was to beat the Jew. My father had always instructed me to do what everyone else was doing, but no matter how hard I tried, my hand could not move. I actually felt my heart ache, and I remembered my mother's words: "You might have pretty blonde hair and not look Jewish," she said, "but inside you is a Jewish heart. No matter what you go through and what you try to be, that will never change." Now I knew what she meant.

The old man gave me a knowing look and mumbled in Yiddish, "survive and remember." I realized that I would rather die than hit him. Luckily, no one noticed. That man had a Jewish heart, too. He would rather have had pain inflicted on him than give me up. That was his *mitzvah*. Being Jewish means a way of life that never stops giving.

One day Kasia took me to visit her son and his family in a small village in the mountains. It was the Ukrainian Easter. We left at dawn and walked through the forest for a very long time, not arriving until mid-day. The village was located at the foot of a mountain peak, surrounded

by lush woods. The little white houses had straw roofs and were separated by orchards and huge fields of potatoes and corn. In the middle of the village stood an old, ornate wooden church.

The bells of the church rang out as the people emerged from Easter Mass. They were dressed in magnificent folk costumes. The men wore billowy, hand-embroidered pants, with white linen shirts and clean, polished boots. The women wore colorful skirts and blouses, and hair bands with bright ribbons that flowed as they walked. They all seemed so happy and carefree.

We sat down to eat. The tablecloth was a *tallis* (Jewish prayer shawl), covered with bloodstains. Kasia's son bragged how he had to beat up an old Jew to get it.

The food consisted of a roast pig, potatoes, cabbage, and lots of vodka. The men were outdoing one another with anecdotes about abusing and killing Jews. One young man described how he threw a Jewish baby into a well and how the mother carried on. Everyone laughed.

I was getting sick to my stomach. My head started spinning, and an intense nausea came over me. I got up from the table and ran out. I stayed lost in the forest for many hours and did not get to Engineer Ringel's house until very late at night.

When I saw Kasia again, she told me that no one suspected me of being Jewish. She told her family that I had eaten some mushrooms on the way to the village, that I had gotten sick from one, and that I was too ashamed to go back to the house.

The Rainbow
(Spring 1944)

I am hiding in the woods. I see trees coming to life, all shades of green, and some early wildflowers blooming. The birds are back, and their sweet chirping fills the air.

With luck, I might find something edible among the fresh growth. How I envy the deer munching food.

Yet I cannot enjoy this serenity. I smell death. I walk toward it, a dead German soldier. He looks very young and kind of cute.

As I stare at him, I notice a big blue sapphire ring. It looks familiar. With a small stick, I move the ring around. On the back there is an inscription: "Kassel G". The ring belongs to Kassel Greifinger, my friend Lusia's daddy.

The soldier's eyes are wide open, as if he were wondering. I am wondering too.

It stops raining, and oddly my spirits begin to lift. I feel the promise of something beautiful about to happen.

Suddenly there is a magnificent burst of colors. Is this a bridge to a better life? I wish I could follow it forever.

“Ein Mensch Must Ein Sein”*
(August 1944)

The forest became my haven. I roamed through it freely, and every animal I encountered was my friend.

Late at night I knocked on doors of people who were willing to give me food and let me sleep in their barns, sheds, or any other place outside the actual house. This way they could not be accused of hiding Jews. The Sobkowitz family was the best. They were very frightened since the episode in February, but they were there for me all the time.

Rumors began circulating that Russian and German troops were fighting nearby. Many men in the labor camp were being transferred by train to other places. My uncles Bronek and Michael were among those deported. My father was left behind, and we managed to meet occasionally in the woods on top of a mountain that overlooked Boryslaw.

The Ukrainian police became a little more lenient and looked the other way when my father left the camp. They feared the return of the Russians and thought that helping a few Jews might ease their guilt. My father was afraid that if the Germans left, they would blow up the camp first, with the 200 or so Jews still in it. So he planned to escape with his friend, Mr. Einstadt, and find a safe place for the three of us.

For days we heard shooting far away. It was like music to our ears as it got louder and closer, bringing promise of liberation.

* Like so many expressions in Yiddish, *Ein mensch must ein sein* is impossible to translate exactly. It means that one should always be a *mensch*. It means that one should always do the right thing, keep one's word, be true to one's self and other people. This is what my parents always said and what they taught me by their examples.

One night when I arrived at Engineer Ringel's house, Pana Ziutka told me to climb up under the roof of a nearby barn. Inside were five Jews, waiting for the fighting to end. Among them was Inz Schlossenberg, a friend of my family. He told me that the Gestapo had left and that the Russians would be reaching us very soon.

I left the barn before daylight to meet my father on the mountaintop. I heard gunfire while I climbed, but it was a beautiful sunrise. I was intoxicated by the colors and smells of nature. The berries were magnificent and ripe. I felt such happiness that I sang aloud all the way to the top.

The war was ending! The Germans had not blown up the camp, so I knew my wonderful Tusko was alive. Soon I caught sight of him climbing the mountain toward me. He seemed so old and tired. His gorgeous hair was shaven off, and he looked so tragic. His eyes lit up when he reached me. We hugged each other tight and cried with joy. It was almost over.

My father told me that many people had fled the camp when the Gestapo left and the Ukrainian police took charge. We planned to go to the Sobkowicz family and wait for the arrival of the Russian troops. But first, he told me, I should go ahead while he ran back to the camp to get his friend, Mr. Einstadt.

I pleaded with him not to go, but he said he would not be able to live with himself if he let his friend down. "Remember what your mother always said, '*Ein mensch must ein sein.*'" I promised to get him out, and I will. Believe me, I will see you in just a few hours."

From the top of the mountain, I could see the train station and a few trains. I thought that the people running away were Ukrainians and Poles who had killed or mistreated Jews.

Still humming my songs, I reached the Sobkowicz's house. Mrs. Sobkowicz was standing outside, wringing her hands in despair. She cried out to me that the Ukrainian police had surrounded the camp, taken all the Jews, and put them on trains—my father among them.

I found a small shed behind a wall and cried bitterly. Green fluid came out of my mouth for hours. I lay there soaked in it. I wanted to die. When Mrs. Sobkowicz found me, she poured buckets of cold water over me and kept shaking me. She kept me alive.

“Your father was not killed,” she told me, “just sent away. You will see him again.”

Soviet troops entered Boryslaw two weeks later. Mr. Einstadt was not among the many Jews who were deported. He had left the camp before my father returned for him.



My beloved father

Sierota
(Orphan)
(August 1944 – May 1945)

The arrival of the Red Army was not the glorious, happy liberation I had dreamed of. These men were not the soldiers we remembered from 1941. These were a different breed, Mongolians, short and stocky, speaking a Russian that was hard to understand.

A day or two after their arrival, I ventured toward town. I walked very cautiously on the outskirts, always hiding between trees and bushes. I saw some soldiers bathing in a pond and indulging with peasant women, picking up their skirts and raping them one after another as casually as washing themselves. The women hardly made a sound, even after being slapped. The men made hideous noises, laughing the whole time. I was horrified.

About 150 Jewish people survived in Boryslaw. They were hidden in cellars, attics, and bunkers in the forest. They were a ghostly white, and it took a while before they could walk properly. They always seemed to resent me because I looked healthy and strong. Little did they know how terrified I was of being an orphan.

In September it was announced that all the children would have to register for school. A convent was converted into housing for those of us without a home. The nuns shed their robes and became our guardians. But school was not for me. I could not concentrate, and I had lost faith in educated, cultured people. I had seen them behave worse than wild animals. I had also met good, courageous human beings who were totally uneducated, even illiterate, who knew that it was wrong to persecute others. These people were heroes to me. So instead of school, I chose a program that would train me to be a soldier. It was very strenuous, and I was dubious about my choice.

One day a Polish gentleman came to visit me. He was very gentle and kind, and claimed to have known my family. He may have been the priest who had obtained a birth certificate for me, or maybe he was just a friend of my father. He never told me his name. All he said was that I should stay close to “my people”—family, friends, the surviving Jews—and follow whatever they do when the war ends. Then he blessed me and said goodbye.

Drochobycz was a slightly larger town than Boryslaw, within walking distance. It had a huge outdoor market where almost anything could be found to buy or trade. As I was roaming around the market one day, a small night table caught my eye. I knew it did not belong to my parents, yet I was strangely attracted to it. I kept looking at it and touching it. The man selling it was very annoyed and could not understand why a young girl would be so interested in a night table. While he was busy with another customer, I opened the little drawer. Inside were pictures of my family. The table had belonged to one of my aunts. I asked the man if I could have the pictures, even though I had nothing to give him in return. At first he refused. When I pointed to some soldiers approaching, he told me to take the pictures and leave. A while later I went back to see the man, but he was gone. Only the table was left.

It was wonderful to have pictures of my family and not be afraid to get caught with them. I took it as a sign that I should become my old self again. I no longer looked or behaved like I belonged with the people in the photos, but I knew I was one of them.

During the next few days, I made contact with friends of my father who had offered to help me. I would leave when they did, just as the Polish gentleman had advised.

On May 8, 1945, my fifteenth birthday, the war in Europe officially ended.

I climbed to the top of the mountain where I had seen my father for the last time. I cried and cried for a long time. It was scary to be alone.

Encountering Survivors (Summer 1945)

By midsummer people were traveling all around, looking for their loved ones. Once in a while, a train would pass through Boryslaw. People would wait days for it, either to board or in the hope that a lost family member might appear.

Since I was the property of the orphanage, I did not have the exit papers required to board the train. Friends of my father made plans to help me escape. I would go to Krakow, a large city in southern Poland, to look for my father and uncles. A Jewish information center had been set up there, and thousands of Jews who had survived the war in Eastern Europe traveled there to look for loved ones.

The night I sneaked out of the orphanage, I was wearing only a ballet costume. I was finally having my chance to dance *Coppelia*, and the performance was going on just as the train to Krakow was boarding. A young Jewish boy who had worked in the woods with my father came to get me, and we ran out of the auditorium. The Jews on board hid me in a car with the animals, threw an empty potato sack over me, and covered me in hay. I lay buried there until the train departed. Inspectors looked inside the car but did not spot me. Later on the women gathered some clothes for me, but when we reached Krakow I was still barefoot.

It took about two weeks to get there. The train arrived in the middle of the night, and I got off feeling frightened and bewildered. I knocked on the first door I came to and pleaded with the couple to let me stay until morning.

The next day I found my way to the information center, which was located in the building that had been Gestapo headquarters. A big crowd had gathered in the courtyard, all blended in a mass of gray and black stripes. Every head was shaved. One could not distinguish the men from

the women. Their clothes fit badly, either long and loose, short and loose, or so tight that their bones looked like wooden sticks wrapped in rags. Their eyes were like deep black holes staring into space.

They sat on the ground in small groups, holding soup bowls. Volunteers from the Polish Red Cross went around filling the bowls. I wanted some soup too, but the huddled, emaciated people yelled at me to go away. With my long blonde braids and rosy complexion, I did not look like a Jew and did not seem to deserve a portion of their food. I tried to explain my situation, but I did not speak Yiddish. That was the common language of Jews everywhere. Whenever Jews from different countries were thrown together, they spoke Yiddish to each other. It was the language they spoke in concentration camp. So when I tried to explain myself in German, that really infuriated the people in the courtyard, and I was forced to leave.

I went inside the building, where people lined up to get information about their lost relatives. One by one, names were called out on the loudspeaker. Anyone who knew something about the person or a family member came forward. When finally they announced my name, an old man came up to me and asked if I was related to Michael Jager. When I told him that Michael was my mother's brother, he started kissing my hands and crying.

As the crowd gathered around, the old man—named Mr. Grad—told everyone that my uncle had saved his life. It was in concentration camp. My uncle had shared bread with him and carried him on his back to *appel* (daily roll call) because the old man was too weak to walk on his own. If left behind in the barracks, he would have been shot on the spot. Such goodness and courage were rare in a place where every minute was a struggle to live.

Mr. Grad believed that Michael was still alive, but he did not know my uncle's whereabouts. The old man pleaded for someone in the crowd to take care of me, and an elegant

couple stepped forward. The man asked if I knew how to cook. The lady explained that they had recently returned from Russia and were living in his old apartment. If I could prepare meals for them, she said, they would love to take me in.

The apartment belonged to this Mr. Steiglitz, whose first wife and children had died in concentration camp. He was an officer in the Polish army, fighting alongside the Russians, when he met Stefa. Now back in his hometown, Steiglitz had managed to restore his old assets and acquire a lot of money. He allowed me to spend it liberally, as long as the meals were satisfactory.

Early every morning I went to the market and asked the women how to prepare the dishes the couple requested. With plenty of money at my disposal, it was easy to get help. Sometimes, when the meal was too intricate for me to make, the women would come home with me and do the cooking themselves. The couple liked me a lot, and I felt very comfortable living with them. They even suggested that I find someone to relieve me of my work for a while so I could to go to school.

As more and more people returned from the camps, we learned about the horrors they had endured. There were many survivors, and I was full of hope that my Tusko would be among them. With every knock on the door, I expected him to walk in. I wondered if he would be proud of the way I had survived. I knew he would be amused to find me working as a maid and cook.

One day late in October there was a knock at the door, and it was my Uncle Bronek. He had survived the Dachau concentration camp and learned that I was living in Krakow. Now he had come all the way to find me. The communication among survivors just after the war was incredible. Somehow they knew who was alive and how to find them, or at least whom to ask.

My uncle told me that my dear father had not survived concentration camp. I could not come to terms with that and refused to believe it. Bronek promised that we would look for him, since nothing was certain in those times.

A few days later we left for Munich, where Bronek lived. The trip to Germany was illegal, and secret arrangements had to be made. Truck drivers were bribed to hide us among the goods they were transporting. There were about 15 of us in the group; I was the youngest and strongest. The trip was long and difficult, taking us from Poland through Czechoslovakia. Finally, late one night, we crossed the border into Germany through dense woods. I taught the people how part the branches without making a sound.

When we finally reached a railroad station on German soil, the authorities gave us tickets for the train. Later I found out that they, too, had been bribed. On board the train, I heard concentration camp survivors tell stories that were too terrible to imagine. I realized how lucky I was to have escaped horrors like that.

My uncle and I lived in Munich with two of his friends from camp (Jack Kostman and his father), and we were like a family. My uncle married a wonderful woman named Szpryncka, and they treated me like their child. I went to a Hebrew high school sponsored by the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). When the time came, we would to emigrate to Israel.

New Families

The time I spent in Munich after the war, from October 1945 to June 1947, was like a trance. Being young and alive seemed all that mattered. Thoughts of the future occasionally crept into my mind, but I pushed them away and tried to enjoy life.

Uncle Leon was released from labor camp in Siberia and came to live with us in Munich. Michael, we found out, was living in Bari, Italy. We wrote back and forth, hoping to reunite soon, but I would not see my favorite uncle again for several years.

Leon was hurt and lonely. He had suffered great hardship in Siberia, his feet permanently damaged by frostbite. Most of all he missed his wife, Mania, and daughter, Stella. He always carried pictures of them. I told him how my parents managed to get them out of the ghetto during the German occupation and brought them to our house. I was never able to tell him how much Stella and my Aunt Mania missed him, how they talked about him constantly and kissed his photograph every night. One time Ciocia Mania told me that if her dear Leon were around he would save them just as my father had saved me. Leon knew that they had been shot with hundreds of other Boryslaw Jews and buried in a mass grave. I told him very little about the misery they went through before being killed. My Uncle Leon later came to the United States, where he married a woman named Claire and lived a quiet life in Newark, New Jersey.

In 1947, when I learned that some of my schoolmates were registering to go to America, I decided to sign up, too. It was purely a whim. My visa came through a few weeks later, and when I told my uncles they got into a big argument. I was the only female survivor in the family, and my uncles were very protective of me. Leon felt I was their responsibility and should wait until all of us could emigrate together. Bronek and Szpryncka would be going to Israel, and Leon wanted an easier life for me than the one awaiting me there.

Leon, Bronek, and Michael's uncle, Isaac Jager, the brother of my grandfather Munish, had emigrated to America many years before. I remembered a big portrait of his family in my grandmother's house. When I told my uncles that I wanted to go to America, Bronek wrote to a Jewish relief organization called HIAS in the hope that they could locate Isaac's family.

I left for the United States in June 1947. The ship was called the *Ernie Pyle*, and it was full of Jewish orphans. The trip was difficult. We hit big storms, and most of the children were sick. I felt fine and spent much of my time taking care of a little girl named Basia. She was only six. Her Jewish parents had been killed several years before, and Basia had been raised by a Polish woman whom she believed to be her mother. Basia's real parents, before they were deported, had left the names of relatives in California with a Polish priest. When arrangements were made for Basia to live with the relatives, she had to be taken away from her Polish "mother."

Basia became very attached to me during the three-week journey. The two of us knelt and prayed every night, not knowing what to expect in a foreign country, both of us alone. Her relatives were waiting at the docks upon our arrival, and she had to be torn away from me, too. I was very sad to lose her.

The ship arrived in New York on June 21, 1947, and I was dizzy with excitement. The children whose families were not there to meet them were taken to a big, badly kept house. After the comfortable life in Munich, it was a big letdown. The next day, however, a Czech girl I had befriended on the ship talked me into going with her to Times Square. She knew only a little English; I didn't know any. However, I did have \$20 that my uncles had given me. The tempo of life intoxicated me completely. I loved that day, my first in America. I fell in love with Manhattan.

There was a big to-do when we arrived back at the house. A big blonde woman, with a funny-looking gray-haired man, started yelling at me in German. I was scared of both of them and ran away. As I later learned, the funny-looking man was Albert Einstein. They had read about the arrival of the orphan ship and came all the way from Princeton to adopt me. They had seen my picture in the newspaper and found out that I was born in Vienna, the city he loved. But when I ran away, they took the Czech girl instead.

The next day, looking out the front window of the house, I saw an older man and three young men walking down the street. They looked so familiar I was sure I was hallucinating. As they got closer, I stared in disbelief. Yaegers! They had to be! As it turned out, they had also seen my picture in the newspaper, and now they had come to claim me.

Their resemblance to my lost family and was uncanny. Isaac Yeager looked just like my grandfather, Munish, before the war. The three sons, Saul, Sam, and Herman, had true “Jager noses”—the one I always hated on me. There was also a daughter, Yetta, whom I met the following week. It was hard for me to believe that there was a whole family of Jagers living in America that looked so much like the ones who had perished in Europe.

We had trouble communicating at first, but I understood that they were willing to take me into their family. A few days later, after the legal documents had been processed, a social worker named Miss Shapiro drove me to New Jersey where the Yaegers lived. As we drove through the Lincoln Tunnel, I remembered a book I had read about it, called *Der Tunnel*. Until that moment, I thought the book was fiction. Miss Shapiro said I was very lucky to have found a family that was so anxious to have me.

Yetta, her husband Morris, her son Jerry, and her daughter Sandra lived together with Uncle Isaac and Tante Becky. When Yetta embraced me I nearly fainted. She was so much like

her cousin, my mother. Even though I didn't speak Yiddish, there was so much warmth and love in Yetta's expressions that I knew what she was saying. Jerry was my age and Sandra a few years younger. They spent that entire summer getting me "Americanized." We were constantly going to the movies, ice cream parlors, hot dog stands, and the other places where their friends gathered. Jerry teased me for choosing them to live with because they were the poorest of the Yaeger clan, but I was very happy with the choice. Uncle Isaac and Tante Becky felt like real family to me—the one I missed. Whenever I went out, Uncle Isaac sat by the window and waited until I arrived home safely.

Uncle Isaac reminisced a lot about life in Boryslaw and how he had left the family for America. He especially missed his oldest brother, Munish. I did not have the heart to tell him that my Grandpa Munish had died of hunger. My mother and the rest of us were hysterical and felt it was our fault. I didn't understand why we were all so hungry then. It was because my mother was giving away all her portions. I was scared that she would die of hunger, too. Would that be an easier death than being gassed in Belzec?

But I was not able to share these thoughts with the Yaegers or anyone else now. I could not imagine that anyone would comprehend them. My new-found family wanted very badly to put me on the right track, send me to school, and have me lead the life of a carefree American teenager. But it was too late. I felt like I was 100 years old and wanted most of all to take care of myself. I signed up for a vocational school and received a high school diploma, plus a beautician's license. At night I went to school to learn English.

It was there that I met the Hacker family—mother, father, and two sons, Bernie and Karl. I was very taken with them and they with me. They told me there was a third son, Jack, who spoke English well and was going to Newark College of Engineering. The Hackers and I got

into the habit of leaving school together after class. Bernie and Karl walked their parents home and then walked me to the bus stop, sometimes all the way home. The family became very dear to me, and as time passed we became close friends.

One evening, half jokingly, Bernie told me that I should make up my mind as to which of the brothers I would like to have as a boyfriend. I told him that I liked them both like brothers, but would they introduce me to Jack? I was very attached to the whole family and hated to lose their friendship. The following Sunday they would be playing tennis in Weequahic Park in Newark, which was close to where I lived. Halina, my best friend, came from Brooklyn to stay with me. On Sunday we sat on a bench in the park watching the Hackers play tennis.

Halina and I had met in Munich in 1945. Both of us were trying to hop on an overcrowded, fast-moving streetcar. I made it first and pulled her up. Then I cursed in Polish. She had thought I was German, and when she heard me she started to laugh. It was love at first sight. Both of us were Jewish and from Poland. We were almost the same age and felt a tremendous need for friendship. Halina had survived the war in Auschwitz and was fortunate enough to meet up with her four sisters and one brother, all concentration camp survivors. Halina was the one who had talked me into signing up to go to the United States instead of Israel. She arrived in New York before me and lived in Brooklyn. Halina and I were the closest of friends, like sisters, until she died of cancer in 1979.

Halina came from a religious family and remained observant for the rest of her life in spite of all the suffering she had endured. Her faith in God amazed me. It helped put me back in touch with my own Jewish identity.

As we sat watching the Hackers play tennis that Sunday, I told her what a fine, religious European family they were. Naturally she thought that was wonderful. Jack was wearing a white pullover and long white pants. He was tall, dark, and handsome, and he played tennis with a lot of style. I knew that if my parents were alive they would fully approve of him for the same reason Halina did. "I just fell in love," I said to her. "Now let's meet the boy I hope to marry."

Jack and I were married two years later, on November 27, 1949. His family became mine, and I lived in the bliss of an imaginary happy family life for 28 years. I had fallen madly in love with Jack, but I realized very early in our marriage that we were wrong for each other. I assumed that because he had survived the war with his entire family and had an education that he would have the compassion and caring that I needed. It wasn't so. He had more conflicts within himself, and I did not know how to handle them. When he started to travel on business, sometimes for two or three weeks, I began to change. I became a different woman, more self-assured and independent. Gradually, whatever drew us together dwindled away.

It is now more than 20 years since our divorce. I still have a very warm spot in my heart for Jack, and I wish him well. Together we have three sons, Mark, Jeff, and Rick. Each one of them is a wonderful, decent, well-mannered man. I know it took both of us to achieve that. If I had my life to live again, I would marry Jack again to have sons like them. My favorite pastime is to look at my sons and my grandchild. Whatever I went through, God made it all up to me by giving me treasures like them.

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One of the most important people in my life was my Uncle Michael, and the end of his story deserves a special place. Michael came to America shortly after my wedding and moved in with us. I was so happy to see him again! The Yaegers, his first cousins, received him with open arms, and I hoped that together we could restore the thread of our lost family life.

I kept remembering the times before the war when my mother reproached him for being a ladies' man. "You should settle down!" she told him. Michael had lived with my grandparents and loved being a bachelor. When we visited them on Saturday afternoons, all the nieces loved listening to his stories and singing along with him. I didn't always understand the songs, but I had the feeling they were a little wicked and loved the innuendos. He called them his "non-kosher" songs. Sometimes my uncle would pick me up at school in a horse-drawn carriage, usually accompanied by a beautiful lady. Although it was an open carriage and the whole town could see us, I felt very grown up and privileged to share his secrets.



My Uncle Michael

My uncle lived in a room above our apartment now, and we found out what terrible problems he had. He would wake at all hours of the night, screaming and shaking with terror. We took him to some very prominent doctors, who said that his behavior was not surprising in light of the horrors he had witnessed. They tried all kinds of tranquilizers and other treatments, but none of them seemed to help.

Once, after receiving an electric shock treatment, my uncle confided in me. At Mathausen concentration camp, where he had been deported, he was selected for the group whose job it was to shovel the bodies of dead Jews into the gas ovens. Most of the people chosen to do this were killed as well, but a Nazi guard took a liking to my uncle and kept him alive. So my uncle continued this work for months, until the end of the war.

Now, every night, he saw the faces of the people he had cremated—including my father. His condition worsened.

Michael did get a lot of joy from my older sons, Mark and Jeffrey, and he spent a lot of time with them. I promised him that if I had another child, I would name it after his mother (my grandmother), Reha. In May 1961, I gave birth to a third son, and we named him Rick. My uncle was ecstatic. He would spend hours holding the baby, stroking his *kepele* (head) and singing Jewish and Polish lullabies to him.

One day my uncle told me that, with his mother's name now carried on, he saw no reason to live. He felt that human beings were very cruel and that God had abandoned us.

In September 1962, Michael Yaeger committed suicide. He was 56 years old.

On February 19, 1992, my son Rick and daughter-in-law Ava gave birth to a son. They named him Michael.

Journey into the Past *(July 1993)*

There is an old Ukrainian ballad that I hummed for many years, every time I dreamed of going back to Boryslaw. Although I had forgotten most of the words, I remembered what the song was about: the wind blowing the trees so hard that they bend all the way over, touching the ground, and the land calling back the people who left her. The heart cries out to return ... but how?

After the war, Boryslaw and the area around it became part of the Soviet Union, and foreigners were prohibited from visiting. Not until 1989, when the USSR finally collapsed, were the gates opened. The first Jewish emigres to make the trip were a group from Israel, who reported the appalling condition of the mass grave sites. Local people complained that human remains had been appearing in the woods and fields. Upon hearing this, Jewish survivors of Boryslaw and Drochobycz from the United States, Israel, and all over the world got together, collected money, and appointed a committee to supervise the reburial of our loved ones and the erection of appropriate monuments in each town.

In July 1993, I joined with about 50 people from the United States and 150 from other countries to attend the unveiling. Finally my dream was becoming a reality. I would be returning to my hometown.

The meeting place was Lvov, a city in Ukraine a few hours north of Boryslaw. Although most of the people did not know one another, everyone greeted each other like close family. What an emotional sight it was! All of us shared an overwhelming need to return to our roots and make peace with the core of our being.

It took a long time to get through customs and visa control. The officials examined our passports and entry permits very carefully, and uneasiness set in as they checked every bag and piece of equipment. We traveled by bus to Truskawicze, the closest town to Boryslaw with a hotel. The two-hour ride was very picturesque. The mountaintops and entire countryside were covered by forest, all shades of green, and the air was fresh and clear. I felt so grateful to be alive and finally making the journey back into my past.

The hotel we stayed in looked impressive on the outside, but was quite different inside. The facilities were primitive, and there was very little food. It seemed to me as if that part of the world had stood still, even taken a few steps back, in 50 years.

It rained hard for the whole two days we were there. On the first day we stood in the rain by a mass grave site at Bronica, where 4,000 people from the two towns—mostly women, children, and elderly—had been killed. At the newly erected monument, a commemoration service was conducted. A rabbi from Israel said *kaddish* (prayer for the dead). Two old men, the only ones remaining in Boryslaw all these years, spoke. They reminisced tearfully about the time those horrible events took place. We listened silently, drenched in the rain, shivering at the memories. The rain did not let up. It felt as if everything around us was weeping, too.

Another monument had been erected by a mass grave at Rzeznica, near which, ironically, a slaughterhouse had stood at the time. There was not a single Boryslawer among us who did not lose someone here—for me, it was my Aunt Mania, my cousins Cesia and Stella, my friends Lusia and Wilus Greifinger, their mother, and many others. Near the slaughterhouse at the time was a nunnery, where, on the day of the murders, I was hiding in the attic. A truck full of religious old men, clutching their prayer shawls, begged God to help them, pleading with Him

to perform a miracle. Ukrainian policemen beat them mercilessly, and then the old men were taken off the truck and shot. So were hundreds of others. The shooting seemed endless.

Standing before this huge grave, we listened to a speech by a Ukrainian priest. He spoke of the equality of all human beings no matter their faith. How nice it would be, he said, if we, the survivors of Boryslaw and Drochobycz, came back and lived side by side with our neighbors.

As he said this, an eerie white fog rose from the earth, as if the dead were crying their outrage. How dare he say such a thing! Surely he must have heard how our friends and neighbors betrayed us. He blamed the entire tragedy on the Germans, when the Ukrainians had committed gross atrocities. I wanted so badly to speak up and tell him some of the things I saw, but I was told not to. We were counting on the local people to take care of the monuments, and many of us were hoping to come back someday. Still, I would have felt better if the priest had asked us to forgive his parishioners for their unspeakable behavior. When we finally returned to the hotel, we were so choked up we could hardly utter a word. Every one of us was filled with sorrow and disgust.

Boryslaw looked different from the way I remembered it. The old houses were torn down, and ugly new housing projects stood in their place. The Tysmienica River had dried up, as had the oil wells. I did see a few spots of oil on the ground, and I imagined how my father would have followed them until he found the origin, then drilled until a big gush of oil burst out.

The next day we separated into small groups, each of us looking for our homes and other familiar places. I remembered that my family's house was located at the end of town, facing a mountain shaped like a big bubble, and that my father's oil well stood on a small hill facing the house. I knew that I would have no trouble locating the spot where the house had been. After all, the Russians could not move or destroy a mountain.

Sure enough, I found the spot—and the house. I could not believe my eyes, and I cannot describe the joy and sadness I felt in seeing it. Suddenly my whole life became real. My body shook, my legs couldn't move. I just stood there and stared. I dug my nails into my hands, trying to wake myself. I was sure I was dreaming again, but there it was! The house and yard were as lovely as I remembered them, the garden and trees in full bloom, raindrops glistening in a ray of sunshine. The gazebo was covered in greenery, and inside stood a round table and benches—exactly as they had so many years before. If these objects could speak, would they remember the good times and laughter?

The front gate of the house seemed smaller to me now, but I could still see—as clear as this moment—the day I saw my father banging his head against the iron posts. Now, as I stood there staring, a young Ukrainian woman came toward me and said that her father-in-law was waiting to see me. Our arrival in Boryslaw had been written up in the local newspaper, and they were wondering when I would come.

July 1993: I found my old house, and it was as lovely as I remembered it—only smaller.



An elderly man come out of the house with outstretched arms and tears in his eyes.

“Felusia,” he said, using my childhood name, “I am so glad to see you. I cannot die until you forgive me.” I stood frozen on the ground. My friend’s son, Arnie, who came with us on the trip, shook me and asked whom this man was.

It was Muzak, the man to whom my father had given the house, the man who raped me. I was speechless, and my traveling companions were as stunned as I was. Here, more than 50 years later, was my house, with Muzak and his family still living in it. The son, to whom Muzak had given ownership, was nowhere to be found, probably because he thought I had come to claim my property. Maruszka, the young bride who had cleaned the lice from my hair, had died a several years before. I wished I could have seen her now.

It was as if the house had been transported in time. The furniture was arranged exactly as it had been back then. There in the bedroom stood my mother’s dressing table, with a little stool covered in the old upholstery, now worn thin. The kitchen was eerily the same, too. There was our big tiled stove, the long table, and the chairs placed around it facing the mountain. The only difference was that the furniture was painted brown. Back then it was light blue with dark blue trim, which had been considered quite outrageous. I couldn’t help picturing it that way. I felt pain and confusion, yet a bittersweet joy as well.

As we sat at the dining room table, I noticed a faded spot on one side where, as a young girl, I had spilled a bottle of ink. I remembered the incident as if it happened yesterday. I was doing my homework on the table even though I had been forbidden to do so. My mother was very angry when she saw the stain, and Pola and I spent hours trying to get it out. It was still there.



It was as if the house had been transported in time, including our old furniture.

We sat around the table eating cookies and drinking tea. Muzak talked about my father and said what a fine man he was. Off to the side, he told me in a quiet voice how terrible he had felt all these years about breaking his promise to my father. He said that he really wanted to save me, but that he was scared. He told me that he had been on the street when the Ukrainian police were escorting the last Jews—including my Tusko—to the train station. My father's eyes pleaded with him to help me, and that look had stayed with him his whole life. Now he asked my forgiveness. We both cried, and so did everyone at the table. Then Muzak explained how much money and work his son had put into the house, but that if I wanted it back we could work out the details.

As my childhood unfolded before me I felt overwhelmed with grief. Muzak's guilt and pain, his admiration for my father, and our mutual remembrance of those years brought us close. I felt no anger or bitterness toward him, just sadness and a sense of futility at everything that had been lost.

The following Sunday we had no particular plans, and I was overcome by the urge to look for the Sobkowicz's house. We were advised not to stray anywhere alone, so I asked one of the hotel managers if he could find me an escort. The manager told me that he would be getting off work shortly, and that he would be happy to take me around if I could buy the gas for his car. I offered him \$25, and he was thrilled. The man's name was Ivan, and he was very curious about our lives under Nazi occupation.

I guided Ivan along the roads I had once walked day and night, in fog and snow. He was amazed that I remembered it all so well. Many thoughts went through my head as we passed familiar spots—where my mother and I had been stopped by the German soldier in 1941, where the Russians had blown up the oil wells and power plant before fleeing. Then we came to a little brook where there had been a big tree trunk to walk across; now there was a small bridge just big enough for a car. Ivan's car, of which he was so proud, rattled and shook with every bump in the road, and I wondered if we wouldn't be better off walking.

Before long I was able to find the Sobkowicz's house and the barn where Nemetz and the Ukrainian policemen had found me. Across the road in a big field, we saw an old woman raking leaves. When we pulled up in the car, the woman walked quickly toward us, shaking the rake in a threatening way. Ivan told her that I lived in America but that I had survived the war in this very place. Crossing herself feverishly, the woman became very agitated and broke out in big red hives.

"That is impossible!" she cried. "The Jews who were hidden here were discovered and shot on the spot. I saw it myself." Then, pointing at me, the old woman said, "And she was one of them! Why did she come back to haunt me?"



The Sobkowicz's' old barn. A door inside led to the bunker that had been my hiding place in 1944, until my discovery by Ukrainian police. There it stood, almost 50 years later.

The superstitious old woman thought I had come back to haunt her. When finally she calmed down, she led me and Ivan (right) to a small bunker in which 15 other Jews had been found.



Ivan calmed the woman down and assured her that I had only come back for memories. Then she led us to a spot not far from where I had been hidden. I recalled my father talking with Mr. Sobkowicz about the incident the old woman was remembering. There had been about 15 Jews hidden in a small bunker; they were found one day and immediately shot. I asked Ivan to find out more, and the woman blurted out, "It wasn't me! It was my husband! He spotted them and told the devils. He must be with them now." The woman pleaded to have her picture taken with me and to be remembered well because none of it was her fault.

I was ready to go home now. I felt a desperate need to see my children and take hold of my life. After all my experiences and all the roles I had played since the war, I had found my true self back in Boryslaw. I am "Corka Pana Strassera," the daughter of Mr. Strasser. That alone saved my life, and it has always made me feel special.

Seeing my family now, I know my father would be very proud and happy. Sometimes I have the feeling that he is watching over me, for I feel truly blessed.

About the Author

Charlotte Elmowitz was born Serafina Sharlotta Strasser on May 8, 1930, in Vienna, Austria. In 1933 the family moved back to a small town in Poland (now Ukraine) called Boryslaw, where she survived the war as a hidden child. The war in Europe ended on her 15th birthday, May 8, 1945, and two years later she came to the United States on a Jewish refugee ship. Today she divides her time between Manhattan and South Fallsburg, New York, where she owns and operates a small cosmetics company called Serafina. She takes joy in her children, grandson, husband, and friends, and is committed to bearing witness to the Holocaust.

